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AUTHOR	Rifkin, Tronie
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ABSTRACT

Studies show that community colleges with more liberal arts courses have higher rates of transfer to four-year institutions than those with a less general curriculum. This paper surveys the research conducted on the community college collegiate function in order determine the influence of the liberal arts curriculum and student support services on student transfer and baccalaureate attainment. The liberal arts curriculum aids student transfer by contributing to academic preparation, which literature has deemed the most important factor in transfer success. Articulation agreements and faculty collaboration with four-year institutions are also integral aspects of transfer, along with student support services that provide information and counseling, periodic assessments, and efforts to increase motivation. However, lack of time, money, and technological capacity may cause difficulties in sustaining the collegiate function in community colleges. In addition, inconsistent means of measuring transfer and collecting data between schools make transfer assessment difficult. One way of strengthening the role of community colleges in higher education is to measure the contribution the liberal arts curriculum makes to the transfer function in terms of student academic competencies. The role of transfer arrangements and faculty collaboration between two- and four-year colleges on the collegiate function should also be explored. Contains 38 references. (YKH)

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Tronie Rifkin

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Issues Surrounding the Community College Collegiate Function: A Synthesis of the Literature

by Tronie Rifkin

The community college collegiate function operates as a pathway to higher education for many students. It serves as a connector between a high school diploma and a baccalaureate degree. Even though other community college functions such as occupational, remedial and developmental, or community service education have been developed and promoted over time, the collegiate function--providing lower-division education to students who might not otherwise have access to higher education and preparing them for transfer--remains an integral component of the community college mission.

According to Cohen and Brawer (1987) two basic operations sustain the collegiate function as a pathway to higher education: 1) the liberal arts curriculum and 2) the activities that support student flow into and through the community college and finally into the universities. Courses in English, humanities, social sciences, sciences, math and computer sciences, and fine and performing arts define the liberal arts curriculum. These courses are essential to the collegiate function because they engage students in higher learning and instill in them the values of a democratic society. They teach all students--not only students who intend to transfer--basic educational principles as well as principles of criticism and inquiry that strengthen the mind and cultivate an appreciation for different points of view. In addition, liberal arts courses fulfill general education requirements and involve students in college-level study that is transferable to the university. All in all, the liberal arts curriculum is seen as one of the key influences on student transfer and progress toward the baccalaureate. This is not to say that the non-liberal arts

curriculum should be dismissed and is without merit. However, its role in preparing students for transfer is ancillary; without some collegiate focus non-liberal arts courses are less likely to transfer to four-year institutions.

The activities that support student transfer also are essential to the collegiate function because they enhance student achievement. Services such as orientation programs, assessment, counseling, and advising services, and developmental and remedial education can be useful in assisting students, especially non-traditional and underrepresented students, pursue their academic goals. Such services, however, cannot stand alone. The success of the collegiate function is dependent upon both the liberal arts and the activities that support transfer.

The purpose of this paper is to survey the research conducted on the community college collegiate function in order to determine what it has taught us about the influence of the liberal arts curriculum and student support services on student transfer and baccalaureate attainment. This discussion also will note gaps in the research, raise questions, and consider ways in which the community college can strengthen the collegiate function.

How Does the Liberal Arts Contribute to Student Transfer?

Inherited from the universities, liberal arts courses have been offered in American community colleges since the institutions were founded. Their history has been influenced by student abilities, faculty, and university transfer requirements and these influences continue to have an impact on the curriculum as a whole. The recent emphasis on occupational studies also has had an impact on the liberal arts curriculum. Despite these influences community colleges have maintained the liberal arts not only because of tradition but because such studies cultivate an enlightened citizenry and, more particularly, such studies are believed to contribute to student

degree attainment. But, how does the liberal arts contribute to student transfer?

The most recent curriculum study by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges conducted in 1991-1992 found that 57% of the total community college credit curriculum is devoted to the liberal arts and 43% is devoted to the non-liberal arts (Cohen & Ignash, 1994). That the majority of the total credit curriculum is in the liberal arts is consistent with other curriculum studies by CSCC over a 16 year period. Despite conflicting claims that occupational education constitutes the majority of the credit curriculum, the evidence from this study suggests that the curricular foundation that supports the collegiate function is stable and solid. Further investigation by Armstrong (1993), who correlated CSCC curriculum study data with Transfer Assembly data, revealed a strong relationship between the liberal arts curriculum and student transfer rates. Specifically, colleges with a below-average liberal arts ratio have disproportionately low transfer rates, while colleges above the mean liberal arts ratio tend to have higher transfer rates (Armstrong, 1993; Armstrong and Mellissinos, 1994). Given that the CSCC Curriculum Study also found that a considerable number of non-liberal arts credit courses transferred to four-year institutions, the relationship between the number of liberal arts course offerings and the number of students who transfer is worthy of note and raises the question: How does the liberal arts curriculum, its organization and content, contribute to student transfer?

The Strength of the Liberal Arts Curriculum

A significant strength of the liberal arts curriculum is its contribution to the academic preparation of students. Research on the characteristics of students who transfer has found that academic preparation is one of several variables, including ethnicity and socioeconomic status, that correlate with transfer success. Grubb (1991), Valez and Javalgi (1987), and Lee and Frank

(1990) used two large national databases–NLS 72 and HSB–to study the relationships of these variables to transfer. While they found significant relationships between the ethnicity and socioeconomic status of students and transfer, these relationships were not as strong as the one between academic ability and transfer. On average, those students most likely to transfer to a senior institution had taken an academic program in high school, more math and science courses, and were more engaged with campus life at the community college. These findings, coupled with the positive correlation between liberal arts course offerings and transfer rates, suggest a direct link between academic preparation and the liberal arts curriculum. Yet, this is an area we know little about beyond accounting for transfer course equivalencies and requirements between community colleges and the senior institutions. The majority of the research on what contributes to the academic success and degree attainment of community college students tends to focus on the number and characteristics of those who transfer, not on transfer as an educational process.

Some who write about the liberal arts' contribution to student academic achievement are concerned that the strength of the liberal arts curriculum is being weakened by the changing nature of the curriculum and of the students who enroll. Threats to the integrity of the liberal arts curriculum include the growth and promotion of non-collegiate courses in occupational areas; the infusion of the practical, or occupational, into the liberal arts curriculum; and the decline in the academic rigor of the curriculum (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Grubb, 1991; Clowes & Levin, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). Raisman (1996) observes that the community college collegiate function is in jeopardy "when non-collegiate courses in business and industry start to edge out the core collegiate mission and define community colleges out of collegiate higher education" (p. 17). From their own research, Lee and Frank (1990) deduce that low transfer rates among

academically underprepared students may be a function of the growth in vocational course offerings. Furthermore, several academics have noted that as student abilities decline, instructors expectations change (Richardson, 1984; Richardson & Others, 1983), leading to a flat curriculum with few courses beyond the remedial and introductory levels (Grubb, 1991; Cohen, 1983). Even the extent to which practical and applied skills have interfered with the academic goals of the liberal arts curriculum has been debated, but without resolution (Scott, 1992).

Even though the emphasis on occupational education and the influence of declining student abilities are recognized as real concerns that require attention, the impact of some of these concerns on the integrity of the liberal arts curriculum need to be tested further. New research studies examining what and how the community college curriculum–liberal arts and non-liberal arts--contributes, or does not contribute, to student academic progress toward the baccalaureate would shed light on some of the above concerns. Findings from these studies would reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the liberal arts curriculum in providing the academic preparation necessary to pursue the baccalaureate.

One approach to this end would be to assess student knowledge in the liberal arts course content as a means of determining the impact of the curriculum on student progress. Cohen and Brawer (1987) note that studies of student learning that go beyond course grades can be used to estimate the value added to each student's knowledge. In addition, "the greater knowledge exhibited on the measure by students who have taken certain numbers of courses in the various content areas would provide a verification of curricular effect on the academic preparation of students" (p. 176).

Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, and Terenzini's (1995) study assessing the cognitive development

of community college students is an example of the potential power research on academic competencies can have. Using the National Study of Student Learning to track cognitive development in freshman and sophomore reading comprehension, mathematics, critical thinking, writing, and science reasoning, they compared a sample of students from 23 community colleges and four-year institutions across the country and found no distinguishable differences. This study presents new findings and is a first step in measuring the role of the curriculum on academic achievement.

However, additional research that explores differences in the course competencies, course taking strategies, and attendance patterns between those students who transfer and those who do not can provide valuable information on transfer as an educational process. The more we know about the educational paths and accrued academic competencies of community college students the better equipped we are to understanding transfer as an educational process and the role of the liberal arts in that process.

The Role of Articulation Agreements and Faculty Collaboration with Four-Year Institutions

The effect of the liberal arts curriculum on student knowledge is, of course, dependent on its organization and content. The organizational strength of the collegiate curriculum generally has been consistent due to the nature of the course credit exchange system between the community college and the university. Articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions and their faculty are a product of this system. Whether or not students should be required to complete the associate's degree is one of the key issues that arises in articulation negotiations. A 1991 American Association of Junior Colleges study reported that although the number of associate degrees awarded between 1975 and 1990 increased by 20%, enrollments

increased by almost 40%. More recently, Palmer, Ludwig, and Stapleton (1994) conducted a study of community college transfer students at randomly-selected universities in 13 states and found that only 37% attained associate degrees before transferring to the university. Although the data are limited, it seems that students who enroll in liberal arts courses do not rely on the associate degree.

In response to low associate degree attainment among transfer students, some states–Illinois and Virginia are good examples–have replaced the associate degree requirement with transferable general education or liberal arts modules that represent system-wide expectations for lower-division academic achievement. Does this mean that the associate degree no longer plays a role in sustaining the collegiate function? Do liberal arts general education modules enhance the academic preparation of students and achieve greater transfer success than the associate degree requirement? Answers to these questions are important. How much the structure of the curriculum influences the educational experience and academic achievement of students is fundamental to sustaining the collegiate curriculum.

Negotiations between two- and four-year college faculty over course requirements for the associate degree or the liberal arts and general education modules tend to be concerned with the organization of the curriculum more than with the academic content. Academic content is as much, if not more, of an influence on the collegiate function as its structure. However, faculty discussion about expectations for student learning and the academic tasks students should be able to perform may require an *interinstitutional*, rather than an *institutional*, commitment from faculty in both sectors (Eaton and Palmer, 1991). The literature identifies faculty involvement in institutional articulation that goes beyond identifying course equivalencies as a critical factor in

improving transfer effectiveness (Donovan et al, 1987; Berman et al, 1990; Knoell, 1990).

Eaton (1990) also is a strong proponent of two- and four-year faculty involvement. Her focus is not on articulation efforts alone, but on curriculum development and revision, too. She calls for an academic approach to transfer education that emphasizes the importance of curriculum and instruction in improving the academic preparation and, ultimately, transfer of students. She urges both two- and four-year faculty to work together to revise curriculum objectives, classroom teaching, and expectations of student performance. The premise of this model is to assure that two-year college students will engage in learning activities at the two-year level that will be of greatest benefit in a four-year setting. The success of the model, however, is dependent on professional relationships between faculty and institutions that "provide students with curricular paths to build on identified intellectual and skills competencies rather than on tentative lists of course equivalencies" (Palmer & Eaton, 1991, p. 39).

Collaborative efforts between two- and four-year faculty to articulate and discuss course content exist in various forms. Some have been initiated by the individual colleges themselves, while others have been state mandated. To date, we do not know whether or not the faculty collaboration that exists has achieved the goals of Eaton's academic model. Nor does the literature provide us with more than descriptive anecdotes of the successes or failures of these collaborations. Research efforts to explore the impact of faculty collaboration on the curriculum and student educational attainment can elicit new insights that will help us understand the role of faculty in student transfer.

Another area of importance in evaluating the strength of the community college collegiate function is the extent to which career education and occupational courses are transferable to four-

year institutions. Particular attention needs to be given to curriculum design and revision for two-year college occupational-technical programs to acknowledge the growing reality of transfer in career as well as liberal arts areas (Knoell, 1990). Little information is available in national studies about transfer of career-track students, except that the number and percentage of students transferring with occupational-technical degrees have increased in recent years.

Cohen and Brawer (1987) have suggested that most liberal arts study in community colleges is in service to the occupational programs. "Proponents of the liberal arts recognize their curriculum's service to the occupations, because they know that occupational preparation and general education are their institutions' major functions" (p. 170). The concepts on which the liberal arts courses are based are too essential to individual and social welfare to be reserved only for the students who intend to pursue a liberal arts course of study. Therefore the liberal arts are as important for students who pursue an occupational and technical course of study. Cohen and Brawer (1987) and Eaton (1994) have encouraged community colleges to include liberal arts courses as well as integrate liberal arts content into occupational and technical programs. Integrating the liberal arts into occupational and technical programs, brings a transferable college-level focus to these programs. The liberal arts and occupational courses can coexist comfortably as long as both types of programs are at the collegiate level. According to Eaton (1994), applying college-level criteria to liberal arts and career areas of study diminishes the division between the two.

Prager (1988) discusses articulation efforts for postsecondary vocational students: the 'contract major,' an individualized program of study designed for career-track transfer students; the 'capstone' programs which accept technical degrees into a Bachelor of General Studies

curriculum; and the 2 + 2 program model which allows students to move from two-year occupational degrees into four-year degree programs in specialized fields without repeating previous coursework, following a fixed curriculum sequence. These programs are examples of curricula designed to address specific concerns about the gap between occupational and liberal arts studies in transfer from two-year colleges. However, the real success of these programs depends on how academically prepared students are to pursue and attain a baccalaureate degree at a four-year institution.

What Services Support Transfer?

The organization and content of the curriculum as well as collaborative efforts and articulation agreements have little effect unless prospective transfer students understand the transfer process and what is required of them to transfer. Information, counseling and guidance, and other support services can help students, especially minorities and other disadvantaged groups, plan their studies and guide them through the transfer process. Information about transfer opportunities and requirements is provided passively through printed or on-line course equivalency guides, transfer brochures, and other publications. Active support includes orientation programs that provide students with information essential to their academic socialization at the community college and beyond. Orientation programs that describe college program offerings, expectations of students, assistance and services for examining academic goals and abilities, and financial aid, have been found to increase retention at the community college (Coll and Von Seggern, 1991; Glass & Garrett 1995). Though orientation programs appear to be successful in socializing students into the college community it is not clear what impact they have on transfer beyond retention at the community college.

Various forms of assessment, counseling, and guidance services are available to community college students. For example, personal contact with students through transfer centers provide a centralized location for information on transfer opportunities, outreach, and assistance to potential transfer students. The advantage of transfer centers over other forms of student support is that they are comprehensive and often keep track of the progress of their students, make sure they receive needed services, and work to strengthen the coordination of student services available from other campus sources (Valencia, 1993). Also, many have formed links to four-year institution admission personnel, and helped students resolve problems that come up in the transfer process (Academic Senate for California community Colleges, 1996).

Also, many two-year colleges assess student skills at entrance, require remediation where necessary, enforce course prerequisites, and monitor student progress through student matriculation and curricular development efforts. For example, South Suburban College in Illinois combines student assessment with standards of academic progress by requiring students to develop a Transfer Master Academic Plan that details a clear curriculum ladder from basic skills through advanced work (Fonte, 1997). Since research looking at transfer from a national perspective has found, among other findings, that academic preparation is important for transfer success, preventing student attrition by identifying at-risk students, providing developmental or remedial instruction to those who need it, and monitoring student progress are key to increasing students' opportunities to pursue higher education.

Structured academic advising for transfer also is considered a "key ubiquitous component in helping students find their way through the college" (Cohen and Brawer, 1987, p. 130). Student advising has been met with mixed outcomes. Some colleges require all students to see an

advisor, others require only those who are taking a certain number of units. At some colleges faculty are highly involved in academic advising, in others they are not. Another nascent form of advising uses community college students who have transferred to four-year institutions as mentors to prospective transfer students who are still enrolled at the community college (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). In general, counselors are overworked and traditional advising systems are unable to keep track of the number of students that come in and out of the advising offices.

Those institutions that have implemented computerized information systems to provide individualized feedback on midterm academic performance and to appraise students of their progress have improved the efficiency of the advising system. Yet, recent evidence suggests that the personal advising touch, whether by faculty or guidance counselors, is vital to student success. Initial findings from a current Ford Foundation national study examining why certain urban colleges successfully transfer as many students as they do to the baccalaureate suggests that acts of help, intervention, and encouragement from faculty or counselors have the greatest influence (Myhre, 1998). Faculty, by virtue of their contact with students on a daily basis, are likely to influence student transfer expectations through curriculum and advisement. Such influence can directly affect subsequent student success in upper division courses. Clearly, faculty involvement, whether in curriculum development, articulation negotiations, or student advising is valuable to the transfer process.

Beyond assessment, counseling, and advising, some call for special efforts to increase students' level of aspiration and motivation to continue their education. This is especially true for non-traditional, at-risk, and minority students. Knoell (1990) notes that efforts to increase students' level of aspiration and motivation to continue their education is important for two-year

college students who often have short-term goals and little confidence in their academic abilities. Some colleges reach out to high school students as a way of encouraging them to complete the academic coursework required to transfer. La Guardia Community College's Middle College is an example of a successful program designed for high-risk adolescents. This program attracts and motivates students to higher education by offering instruction and services to prepare high-school students for college-level work (Lieberman, 1985; Bowen, 1992).

How do we know that these efforts succeed in sustaining the collegiate function? While most community colleges report on the available activities that facilitate transfer, few identify the impact of these services on the number of students who succeed in transferring. The diverse backgrounds, purposes, and outcomes that characterize community college students are among one of the complications that make assessments of these support services difficult. Other complications include time, money, and technological capacity. At this time, information systems that are designed to track students' educational paths from the time they access any of these support services to the point of transfer are not in place. Most data collection systems stress headcount enrollment rather than achievement and persistence measures. The ability to evaluation the success of the collegiate function depends largely on the development of information systems that serve both program administrators and students. Student support services would benefit from technical mechanisms that identify potential transfer students, gather information on their skills deficiencies (if any), accumulate data on student progress through the educational program, and provide indices of the success students have in transferring and subsequently attaining the baccalaureate. Such data systems also would serve to give students feedback on their academic progress, information on college support services, and information on the transferability of

coursework.

Data collection and the establishment of information systems are only part of the problem. When there is no agreed upon method for measuring transfer how does a state, system, or institution identify and realize transfer goals? The issue is that there are several different definitions of transfer rate and the formula used to calculate it. There are the traditional transfer rate models that consider the eligible pool of transfer students to consist of all first-time college students who have earned some combination of credits within a specified period of time (Cohen, 1991; Berman, Weiler, and Associates, 1990; McMillan and Parke, 1994). There also are emerging alternative models. Alternative ways of measuring transfer activity differentiate between different transfer types and consider transfer eligibility or readiness as a key factor in the definition (Boese and Birdsall, 1994; Rasor and Barr, 1995; Barata, 1992). Because it can be said that no two community colleges are alike, and because of the diversity in the academic background, educational goals, and enrollment patterns of community college students, it seems that one transfer rate may not provide the most complete picture of the transfer activity at any given community college (Laanan & Sanchez, 1996). Therefore, a review of the various transfer definitions and formulas and their effectiveness as measures of the community college's ability to prepare students for transfer. Palmer and Eaton (1991) have suggested the following variables to include in testing hypotheses about transfer rates: strength of the liberal arts curriculum, transfer arrangements with four-year colleges, and matriculation and guidance practices.

How Can Community Colleges Strengthen Their Role in Higher Education?

Throughout this paper the community college collegiate function has been evaluated in terms of what research and other literature tell us about the contribution of the liberal arts

curriculum and of the activities that support student academic progress to the transfer of students from two- to four-year colleges. One way of strengthening the role of community colleges in higher education is to measure the contribution the liberal arts curriculum makes to the transfer function in terms of student academic competencies. Though research has isolated student characteristics that influence transfer, one of which is academic preparation, little is known, beyond speculation and theory, about the influence of the organization and content of the curriculum on student academic progress and baccalaureate degree attainment. In addition, concerns that occupational education programs and student abilities are weakening the liberal arts curriculum need to be tested. Methodologically sound research studies that probe the effectiveness of the liberal arts curriculum in preparing student for transfer can identify strengths and weaknesses. Strengths can be held high as symbols of the success of the collegiate function, while weaknesses can be addressed to strengthen it.

Likewise, the role of transfer arrangements and faculty collaboration between two- and four-year colleges on the collegiate function can be studied. Should the associate degree be strengthened or abandoned? Can articulated liberal arts general education modules sustain the collegiate function? What, if anything, do faculty collaborations add to the curriculum and ultimately, the academic competencies of students? And does the inclusion of transferable liberal arts courses and concepts into career education programs affect the degree attainment of community college students? The answers to these questions would provide the higher education community with further evidence of the value and purpose of the community college collegiate function.

Community colleges offer a number of services that support transfer. Between orientation

programs, transfer centers, assessment, counseling, and advising services there appears to be a support system for all. Probably the main limitation to these services is lack of a comprehensive data collection system. Without the ability to track student's use of these services it is difficult to assess their effect on transfer.

The content and the organization of the liberal arts curriculum and the services that support transfer work together. Both are necessary to sustain the collegiate function and both can be strengthened with information obtained from studies conducted in areas that have yet to be explored.

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